

**U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management**

Caring for America's Wild Horses and Burros

Fundamental Reforms—An Overview



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The Secretary's Initiative

In October 2009, the Secretary of the Interior announced a national initiative to create a cost-efficient and sustainable Wild Horse and Burro Program. Over time, implementation of the Secretary's initiative would reduce the number of unadopted wild horses and burros in short-term corrals or long-term pastures; reduce the costs to the American taxpayer for their care; and conserve, protect, and manage these iconic animals in the West for future generations to enjoy.



The BLM has successfully adopted out more than 225,000 excess wild horses and burros since 1971. Because the demand for burros exceeds the supply, the BLM is holding very few burros. But sustainable solutions are still needed for about 41,000 wild horses.

A New Start

The Secretary's Initiative provided a starting point for a conversation with the public about the management of America's wild horses and burros. The BLM understands that many Americans are passionate about wild horses and burros and have many different, often conflicting, perspectives about how they should be managed. In an effort to bridge these differences, the BLM worked with the U.S. Institute for Environmental Conflict Resolution to engage employees, stakeholders, and potential partners in the development of a proposed strategy.

On June 3, 2010, the BLM released a Wild Horse and Burro Program Strategy Development Document for review and comment. The document outlined draft goals, objectives, and possible management actions for the wild horse and burro program. In response, the BLM received approximately 9,000 comment letters and e-mails.

We Listened – And Are Changing

As a result of these public comments, the BLM is proposing fundamental changes for managing wild horses and burros to improve on-the-range-management of the animals, strengthen measures to ensure the humane treatment and care of wild horses and burros, and provide increased opportunities for public-private partnerships in support of the program. Specifically, the BLM proposes to:

Reduce the number of animals gathered

- Reduce the annual number of wild horses gathered for at least the next 2 years by 24 percent, from 10,000 to 7,600, a level that would essentially maintain the existing number of wild horses and burros on the range. During this time, the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) will review the BLM's current policies and make recommendations on ways to better manage wild horse and burro population dynamics and their interrelationship with the BLM's multiple-use mandate. The review would be completed in early 2013. While the BLM is concerned that forage

limitations may require the removal of more than 7,600 animals in case of drought or other emergencies, it has decided to adopt this more conservative gather approach pending the findings of the NAS.

Strengthen the handling and care of animals

- Conduct thorough reviews and add appropriate controls to the agency's contracts and policies to strengthen the humane treatment of animals. This will apply to both gathering contracts and short-and long-term holding facility contracts.

Increase fertility control

- Significantly increase the number of mares treated with fertility control – from 500 in 2009 to a target of 2,000 in each of the next two years during the NAS study, pending sufficient budget allocations. Ultimately, as technology and methods improve, the BLM intends to make fertility control the principal means by which the agency maintains population levels within the capacity of the forage and water resources of the range. The BLM intends to work closely with the Humane Society of the United States to implement and monitor this expanded effort.

Issue procedures that would allow for the long-term care of animals through partnerships

- Release within the next 30 days specific procedures by which members of the public can apply to enter into partnerships with the government to care long-term for wild horses that are removed from the public rangeland.

Increase adoptions

- Increase the number of wild horses adopted by members of the public by 33 percent, from 3,000 to 4,000 annually.

Promote volunteerism in support of the program

- Promote the BLM's engagement of the public by enhancing public outreach, recruiting local volunteers to assist in monitoring the health of the rangelands where animals roam, and encourage partnerships to increase herd-related ecotourism.

Improve transparency and openness

- Reaffirm throughout the agency the BLM's fundamental commitment to transparency in all facets of the wild horse and burro program. This includes providing increased public viewing opportunities during gathers and at short-term corrals and long-term care facilities to the highest extent possible without compromising the safety of staff, members of the public, or the animals. The BLM is also committed to the accurate, prompt, and public release of information related to the program.

Background and Current Situation

With the passage of the 1971 Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act, the BLM was given responsibility for managing America's wild horses and burros, much-loved symbols of the Western spirit. As a result of this increased protection, the populations of free-roaming horses and burros in some areas began to exceed the land's capacity to sustain them. In some places, water and year-round vegetation was too scarce or the public land was too scattered, setting the stage for conflicts among private landowners and other users of the public lands. In 1976 and again in 1978, amidst fears of overgrazing and damage to rangelands by increasing numbers of wild horses and burros, Congress amended the Act to authorize the BLM to use helicopters to gather excess animals to prevent damage to the range.

Today, the BLM estimates approximately 35,500¹ wild horses and burros roam on nearly 33.7 million acres (26.9 million acres of public land administered by the BLM and 6.8 million acres of non-BLM managed land) in 179 Herd Management Areas (HMAs) across 10 Western states. The BLM conducts gathers to remove excess animals when population size exceeds the Appropriate Management Level (AML). The AML is the number of wild horses and burros that can be sustained in a thriving natural ecological balance with other multiple-uses on the public lands. The AML is determined through a land use planning process that includes public involvement and considers the land's ability to sustain adequate year-round forage and water for animals and healthy rangelands over the long-term.

Wild horses and burros have no natural predators. As a result, herd sizes can double every four years, potentially devastating to both animals and the land. Thus, the Act requires BLM to remove enough wild horses and burros from the range each year to prevent deterioration of the range and animals. The BLM implements various population suppression methods, including administering contraception, to slow herd growth rates. As a result, fewer animals need to be removed reducing costs associated with caring for unadopted animals. When animals are removed from public lands, they are made available for adoption or sale with provisions to ensure their humane care. However, changing demographics, economic conditions, and other factors have reduced the number of animals adopted by the public in recent years.

Because the adoption rate has not kept pace with the number of animals gathered from the range each year, about 41,000 unadopted horses are currently in short-term or long-term holding pastures. This has dramatically increased costs. The care of unadopted animals accounted for nearly \$40 million in fiscal year 2010 Wild Horse and Burro management appropriations – almost 60 percent of the total wild horse and burro budget.

In addition, over the last 2 years, some members of the public have expressed increasing opposition to the BLM's use of helicopters to gather horses and burros and the practice of holding unadopted animals in long-term pastures. Some advocacy groups contend that the BLM's treatment of these animals is inhumane and want more wild horses and burros left to roam on a greater percentage of the BLM-managed lands in the West. Many individuals recognize that the current management approach is not sustainable and have expressed concern that the BLM will use its authority under provisions in the Act

¹ The BLM estimates wild horse and burro population sizes at a given point in time. The current estimate of current population size reflects projected population growth since February 2010, as well as the animals removed during summer 2010, and the number proposed for removal during winter 2010. However, this number does not reflect the results of aerial population inventories conducted during this timeframe. The BLM will update the 2011 estimate of wild horse and burro population size in about May or June 2011.

that require the BLM to euthanize or sell, “without limitation,” certain categories of unadopted animals. This option is not under consideration. The BLM placed a voluntary moratorium on the destruction of healthy animals in 1982, and Congress prohibited the implementation of these provisions through the Interior appropriations bills between 1988 and 2004 and again in 2010.

Other members of the public urge the BLM to continue or expand its current management actions, asserting that the Act and the BLM’s multiple-use mandate and decisions in current land use plans require the agency to remove wild horses and burros when their numbers exceed the established AML. These members of the public encourage the BLM to continue gathers and apply a variety of management tools, including application of fertility control, to keep wild horse and burro populations in balance with the land’s productive capacity and other resources and uses.

In FY 2009, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that the budget increases necessary to pay for caring for so many unadopted horses were not sustainable and recommended that the BLM find effective long-term options (GAO-09-77). The FY 2010 Department of the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act (P.L. 111-88) directed the BLM to prepare a comprehensive, long-term plan and policy for wild horse and burro management.

In December 2010, the Office of Inspector General (OIG) found that the BLM’s gathers to remove excess wild horses and burros were necessary and humane. The OIG made three recommendations: 1. To move forward with the Secretary’s initiative; 2. Develop improvements that focus on science and research to slow population growth rates; and 3. Minimize and reduce the need for short- and long-term holding. The OIG encouraged the BLM to implement best science practices and to pursue new research for wild horse and burro management, as recommended by the National Academy of Sciences.

The Budget Challenge

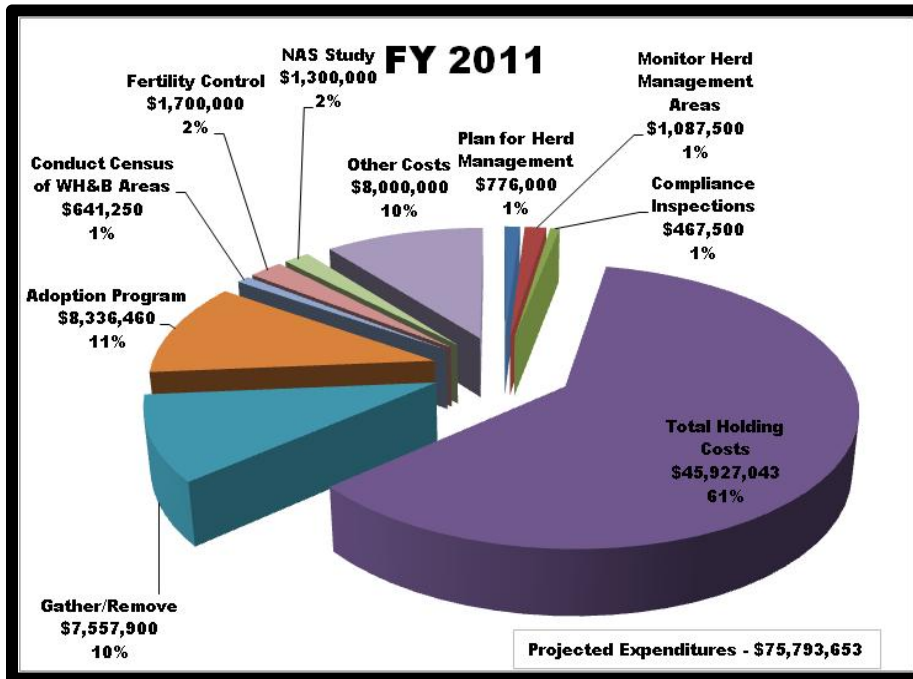


The BLM envisions healthy wild horses and burros on healthy rangelands in the West forever — but to achieve this goal, cost-effective, sustainable solutions are needed.

During FY 2009, the BLM spent more than \$50 million for the Wild Horse and Burro Program — nearly \$10 million more than Congress appropriated. The remaining funds had to be shifted from other BLM programs, such as wildlife, recreation, and range management. Fifty-four percent of these funds (about \$29 million or 70 percent of those appropriated by Congress) were dedicated to humanely caring for unadopted wild horses in short-term corrals and long-term pastures. Costs to care for excess, unadopted wild horses in short- and long-term holding increased by another \$8 million in FY 2010, as the total cost for the Wild Horse and Burro Program grew to nearly \$65 million. In FY 2011, the

President's Budget requests appropriations of nearly \$76 million for the BLM's Wild Horse and Burro Program. Of this, about \$48 million (61 percent) is proposed for the humane care of unadopted and unsold excess animals in short- and long-term holding (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Projected BLM (FY 2011) Wild Horse and Burro Budget²



Projected Program Costs

The BLM's Proposed Wild Horse and Burro Program Strategy

The Proposed Strategy assumes appropriations of about \$76 million over the next four years (equivalent to the President's FY 2011 funding request). The Proposed Strategy calls for a temporary reduction in planned removals of excess wild horses and burros from Western public rangelands that allows the BLM to shift Wild Horse and Burro Program funding to immediate priorities such as increasing fertility control, boosting adoptions, and funding the study by the National Academy of Sciences. The accomplishment of the goals outlined in this strategy is dependent on the level of funding received during FY 2011 through FY 2014.

² The BLM is currently operating under a Continuing Resolution (CR) which limits spending to the FY 2010 enacted level of \$63.986 million. Under these funding restrictions, actual program accomplishments are expected to substantially differ from those outlined in the FY 2011 President's Budget request.

Proposed Strategy for Future Management of America's Wild horses and Burros

A thorough analysis of the public's comments and a detailed proposed implementation strategy will be posted online at www.blm.gov February 28, 2011. It will also be reviewed and discussed at the National Wild Horse and Burro Advisory Committee March 10 -11, 2011, in Phoenix, Arizona. The public is invited to review and provide comments to the BLM on this strategy through March 30, 2011. These comments should be submitted by email to wildhorse@blm.gov with "Comments on Strategy," in the subject line.

Our Commitment

The BLM remains committed to working toward a common goal with all stakeholders to ensure that healthy, viable herds of wild horses and burros remain on the public lands for generations to come and that it does so in a manner that protects the ecological integrity of the Western rangelands.